

Jesus and the law: an exegesis on Matthew 5: 17-20

David Wenham

David Wenham, who holds a PhD from the University of Manchester in the field of New Testament Studies, was formerly Secretary of the British Theological Students Fellowship. Since 1974 he has taught at Union Biblical Seminary, Yavatmal, India.

The very strong statements about the continuing validity of the Old Testament law ascribed to Jesus in Matthew 5: 17-20 have caused great difficulty to many Christian interpreters. Some have felt that they are in contradiction to Jesus' more liberal attitude to the law¹ attested in Mark's Gospel (and elsewhere); others have wondered how they can possibly be reconciled with the teaching of Paul, the writer to the Hebrews and others, who suggest that the Christian is at least in some senses freed from the law.

A common solution to these problems is to ascribe the views expressed in Matthew 5: 17-20 to the Jewish Christians of Matthew's church rather than to Jesus. But this solution, however plausible it may seem, is not without objection on critical grounds,² and it is in any case no final solution for the person who wishes to interpret Matthew 5: 17-20 as part of the Word of God.

How then can we make sense of these verses? Dr Robert Banks has made some important suggestions on this, which, if accepted, would go a long

way to answering our question.³ His views in general on Jesus' view of the Old Testament law are summed up by the editor of *Themelios* as follows: 'Jesus did not "expound" the law, nor did he "abrogate" it, or even "radicalize" it. The law was not, as such, any more the object of his attention than the traditions. His own new teaching moves on a plane above and beyond the law. The question is not Jesus' attitude to the law, but the law's relevance to *him*. It points forward to him, and in that sense it is fulfilled in his coming, and particularly in his teaching. "It is only in so far as it has been taken up *into* that teaching and completely transformed that it lives on" (p. 242). Even the decalogue does not remain in force as "eternal moral law". Only the teaching of Jesus has that status.'⁴

This general position is in accord with and is supported by Banks' detailed discussion of Matthew 5: 17-20. Among the points made by Banks, the following are particularly important (and controversial): in v. 17b., 'I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them,' Banks argues that the Greek word translated 'fulfil', *plerosai*, should not be interpreted to mean 'establish'; rather it means

¹ For example, about the sabbath.
² The partial parallel in Luke 16: 17 should prevent us from quickly concluding that these verses are Matthean.
³ In *JBL* 93 (1974), pp. 226-242 and in his book *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), which was reviewed in *Themelios* Vol. 2, No. 1 (1976), pp. 29, 30. The present writer has been able to consult only the *JBL* and *Themelios* articles when writing this. [The relevant section of the book (pp. 203-226) is in fact a virtually unaltered reprint of the *JBL* article—Ed.]
⁴ *Themelios*, art. cit., p. 29.

to 'fulfil' all that the law pointed forward to, and thus to transcend and replace the law. The law, like the prophets, pointed forward to Christ, and now that Christ has come the law is included in and superseded by him.

In the following verse (v. 18), which speaks of not an iota, not a dot, passing from the law until all is accomplished, Banks takes the phrase 'until all is accomplished' to mean 'until all is fulfilled in Christ' (in the way described already). Once Christ has come, the law is replaced by His teaching. V. 19 warns against relaxing 'one of the least of these commandments', and Banks takes this to refer to Jesus' commands, not to the Old Testament law.

On the basis of such exegetical arguments Banks can conclude that Matthew 5: 17-20 is not concerned to teach the abiding validity of the Old Testament law so much as superiority and authoritative character of Jesus and his teaching.

Objections to Banks' view

Banks argues carefully, and aspects of his interpretation are attractive. But his exegesis of Matthew 5: 17-20 is open to serious questions.

(1) V. 17. Banks' argument that *plerosai* should be interpreted to mean 'fulfil and transcend' rather than 'establish' is not entirely convincing. We may agree with Banks that *plerosai* is normally used in Matthew to mean 'fulfil' (especially of the fulfilment of prophecy), and that quite possibly that thought is present here in Matthew 5: 17—not only the prophets, but also the law are seen as pointing forward to Jesus and as finding their fulfilment in him. But whereas Banks believes that Matthew's thought is that of 'fulfilling and so transcending', the context suggests rather than the thought is that of 'fulfilling and so establishing'. The contrast in v. 17b, 'I came not to abolish but to . . .,' favours this view: 'abolish—fulfil/establish' are a more natural pair of opposites than 'abolish—fulfil/transcend'. And the subsequent context also favours this interpretation: the fact that Jesus is the fulfiller of the law leads on to the practical 'therefore' of v. 19: Jesus' followers are to uphold not abolish the law.⁵

(2) V. 18. The clause 'until all (literally all things) is accomplished' is taken by Banks to mean—until all the law's demands and expectations are

⁵ Banks, of course, has a different interpretation of v. 19. It is possible to argue that *plerosai* simply means 'establish' here and that it does not have the more usual Matthean connotation of 'fulfilment'. The absence of *pleroun* as a translation of the Hebrew *qum* in the LXX is scarcely a decisive point against this. H. Ridderbos understands the verse to mean that Jesus 'maintained and interpreted in its radical sense' the law and the prophets (Paul: *An Outline of His Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, p. 285).

fulfilled, *i.e.* until the coming of Christ. The weakness with this interpretation is the preceding parallel clause 'until heaven and earth pass away'; this clause clearly suggests that the law's validity is until the end of time. Banks argues on traditional grounds that this earlier clause means simply that it is extremely difficult for the law to pass away. But that is not exactly what it says: in Matthew's version the clause is a statement of time 'until . . .', and, even if we allow a measure of rhetorical exaggeration, it clearly suggests that it will be a very long *time* until the law passes. The clause 'until all is accomplished' may be correctly interpreted to mean 'until all that the law points forward to is fulfilled';⁶ but the parallel 'until' clause and also the wider context in Matthew (and in Jesus' ministry) suggest that the reference is to the long-term future (*i.e.* the Second Coming) not to the near future (*i.e.* to Jesus' earthly ministry).

(3) V.19. Banks' interpretation of this verse is the weakest point in his exegesis: as France comments, it is improbable 'that Matthew could have allowed the term *entolai* (= commandments) to follow so closely on a reference to the Old Testament laws in verse 18 and yet expected it to be understood in a quite different and, in his Gospel, unique sense.'⁷ It is not necessary to add much to that comment,⁸ except to say that something similar might be said about Banks' whole exegesis: despite his careful detailed work on the individual verses, it is hard to read the Matthean paragraph as a whole and to accept Banks' conclusion that it is not a statement about the abiding validity of the law, but rather a statement teaching the prophetic and and provisional character of the law of Jesus' transcendence over it.

We might go on to question Banks' general thesis about Jesus' attitude to the law: his view that 'the law was not, as such, any more the object of his attention than the traditions'⁹ and his argument that 'It is only so far that it has been taken up *into* that teaching and completely transformed that it lives on'¹⁰ seems debatable at least: it would be unusual for a Jew of Jesus' day not to have the law as a major objection of his attention, and, although Jesus was unusual and revolutionary in many ways, it is arguable that he does continue to give the law an important place in his teaching and thinking

⁶ So Banks. Compare Matthew 1: 22, 24: 34, 26: 56.

⁷ *Themelios*, art. cit., p. 30.

⁸ We may note a further link between v. 17 and v. 19 in the verbs *katalucin*, and *luain*.

⁹ *Themelios*, art. cit., p. 29.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, quoting *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, p. 242.

(e.g. Mk. 7: 9f., 12: 28f.).¹¹ The same is even more clearly true of Matthew.¹²

Jesus' self-defence

If, then, Banks' explanation of Matthew 5: 17-20 seems unconvincing, what are we to make of these verses? Do they express a rigorist attitude to the law, at variance with Jesus' known teaching elsewhere? I don't think so. The key to the interpretation of the verses seems to me to lie in a recognition of the context in Matthew's gospel and also of the probable context in Jesus' ministry. In Matthew 5 the preceding context in v. 16 is a call to good works, and the subsequent context in v. 20 and the verses that follow is a comparison of Jesus' standards of righteousness with those of the scribes and Pharisees. Matthew's concern then in this section of his gospel, and indeed elsewhere, is for righteous living. It is not unlikely that Matthew is answering a Jewish accusation that Jesus' way represented a departure from Jewish moral standards and a destruction of the law; so Matthew emphasizes Jesus' righteousness and his condemnation of *anomia* (e.g. Matt. 13: 41; 25: 31f., etc.).

If that is the Matthean context, much the same may have been the original context in Jesus' ministry. People were, I suggest, comparing Jesus' revolutionary life and message with the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, and their charge was that Jesus was a libertarian who was abandoning the high standards of the Old Testament law, for which the scribes and Pharisees stood so firmly. We know for certain that this accusation was made against Jesus because of his freedom towards the sabbath law and because of his friendship towards the sinners and outcasts (Matt. 9: 10f.; 11: 19).

In this context Matthew 5: 17-20 makes sense. V. 17 is itself phrased as a denial of the accusation: 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law. . . .' Banks regards the phrase 'Think not. . . .' as a rhetorical device strengthening the following posi-

¹¹ Banks would not deny that the law has a significant place in Jesus' teaching and thinking, and I would, of course, not deny that in New Testament theology the law comes to have a secondary place to Christ and that our relationship to the law is now only through Christ. But Banks' view that the law has passed away except as continued and transformed in Christ is to my mind too negative a way of expressing the truth; I would prefer to say that the law continues as eternal moral law, though now only as a part of the full and perfect revelation of Christ.

¹² e.g. 23: 3, 23. Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977), pp. 246f. on Matthew's 'Jewish Christianity' and on the exegesis of the whole passage.

Although I have disagreed with Banks' exegesis in certain respects, his discussion remains of the greatest importance, and I have not been able to do justice to many aspects of his argument in this short comment.

tive statement;¹³ but there must surely be some slight implication that some people could think that Jesus was abolishing the Old Testament. Jesus says: No; in fact he came to 'fulfil them'—in the sense 'fulfil and so establish'. Jesus came not to denigrate or displace, but to uphold the Old Testament revelation.¹⁴

In vs. 18, 19 Jesus goes on to stress the divine authority of the Old Testament law: as the Word of God it must all stand 'until heaven and earth pass away'¹⁵ or (to describe the same period in different words) 'until all is accomplished'. Jesus then points out the consequence that follows from this: that to ignore or to teach others to ignore parts of the law will meet with disapproval in the kingdom of God. Jesus' new message of the kingdom of God does not mean the overthrow of the Old Testament law; on the contrary, it is maintained.

Having thus decisively denied the charge that he is teaching a lax attitude to the law and to morals, Jesus in v. 20 goes positively on to the offensive, claiming (on the contrary) that the standards of the kingdom are actually far higher than those of traditional Judaism: indeed you will not even enter the kingdom, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. The verses that follow expound this daunting statement, showing how Jesus' understanding of the law is again and again more radical and demanding than that of the Pharisees: Jesus' standard is in fact nothing less than perfection (v. 48).

To sum up the thrust of these verses then: Jesus rejects the charge that he is a law-breaker who is lowering standards by asserting his endorsement of the Old Testament and by claiming that his standards are actually higher, not lower, than those of the supposedly pious defenders of the law, the scribes and Pharisees.

The continuing validity of the OT law

If this is the thrust of what Jesus is saying, then there is surely no great problem in reconciling this with Jesus' teaching elsewhere. There is plenty of evidence of Jesus' high view of the Old Testament as a whole, as well as of the law in particular; he saw it as the authoritative Word of God.¹⁶ There is also plenty of evidence for the radical and demanding nature of Jesus' ethics: going with the gospel of free forgiveness is a demand for a total commitment far deeper than much Jewish observation of

¹³ And he compares 10: 34.

¹⁴ Cf. Romans 3: 31.

¹⁵ Cf. Isaiah 40: 7, 8.

¹⁶ See J. W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (London: IVP, 1972).

the law.¹⁷ There is also no great problem in reconciling the main thrust of the verses with the teaching of Paul and other New Testament writers, who share Jesus' view of the Old Testament and who call for the same standards of perfection from those who are in Christ.

But what then of those New Testament passages that teach that the Christian is free of the Old Testament and other ceremonial law (e.g. Mk. 7: 19)? The simple answer to that is that this passage (Matt. 5: 17-20) is not a detailed statement concerning every single aspect of the Christian's relationship to the Old Testament law; its scope and frame of reference are more limited. As I have argued, the purpose of these verses is to answer the accusation that Jesus is an antinomian who favoured a lowering of moral standards; and the question of whether or not the Old Testament food laws should be binding on all is not here in question.¹⁸

It is true, of course, that there is a *prima facie* contradiction between v. 19 with its insistence on maintaining even the least of the law's commands, and the statements in Mark and Hebrews about foods being clean and about the old covenant passing away. But if we are right to insist that Matthew's concern is with Jesus' general attitude to the Old Testament law and in particular to ethical standards,¹⁹ then this is not in conflict with the views of Mark or the author of Hebrews, neither of whom can properly be accused of destroying the law and the prophets or the moral standards of the Old Testament.

In arguing this I am coming near to reviving the traditional distinction between the moral and the ceremonial law, which Christians have so often used to explain their ambivalent attitude to the Old Testament law. Matthew's concern in these verses, I have suggested, is primarily at least, for the moral law, which is upheld by Christ, whereas Mark and the writer to the Hebrews are concerned

with the ritual and ceremonial law, which they believe is fulfilled in Christ and in the new covenant in such a way that Christ's followers need no longer observe it. Modern scholars have argued that the distinction between the moral and ceremonial law is not one made by the New Testament and is of doubtful validity. Banks himself seems to try to avoid the distinction by insisting that the whole of the law and the prophets are fulfilled in and superseded by Christ.

In one general sense we may accept Banks' view: Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament (the law and the prophets), and he has certainly superseded the law in the sense that our relationship to God is now through Christ, not through the law. But Christ has not fulfilled and superseded the law in the sense that all Old Testament law ceases to be binding on a Christian. No; we have to distinguish those laws, which may be said to point forward to Christ and which are therefore unnecessary after his coming (e.g. the ceremonial laws according to Hebrews) and the moral laws, which do not so obviously point forward to Christ (though they were explained more fully by him) and which continue to be binding eternal moral truths for the Christian. These moral laws are 'fulfilled' by Christ in a very different sense from the ceremonial laws: they are not superseded, but rather are included in the new Christian framework of reference. So, although the New Testament may not spell out the distinction between the moral and ceremonial law, in practice it seems to recognize it.²⁰

That does not mean that when Matthew records 5: 17-20 he is consciously limiting his statement to the moral law; no, his statement is a broad one about the law and the prophets in general. But still he is looking at the whole law from a particular angle, with the question of the moral law and Jesus' ethical standards at the front of his mind.²¹ Had we been able to press Matthew with questions as to the relevance of this passage for the question of the Gentiles and the Old Testament ritual laws, he would probably have said that he had not been thinking of that question at all. But he might also (with no inconsistency, I suggest) have gone on to accept that the ritual laws, though no less divine and authoritative, have been fulfilled by Christ in the sort of way suggested by Banks, and so that they are not binding on Gentile Christians in the way at first sight suggested by 5: 19.

²⁰ So Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 284. His whole discussion of the matter is valuable.

²¹ The same point might be made in reverse about statements such as Hebrews 8: 13: the writer does not mean that all aspects of the old covenant, including the ten commandments, are obsolete.

¹⁷ E.g. later in the Sermon on the Mount.

¹⁸ Was it ever a question in Jesus' teaching and ministry? Mark 7: 19b is the evangelist's comment. Certainly Jesus set himself against the distorting scribal interpretations of Old Testament laws, but he did not speak out on the question of Gentiles and the Old Testament food laws. Had he done so, the church would not have had so much difficulty over the issue.

¹⁹ The following verses in Matthew (and indeed Matthew's whole gospel) suggest that this was his main concern. It would be hard to prove from Matthew that he would have insisted on Gentiles keeping all the ritual and ceremonial laws, though these had a place (Mt. 23: 23). But see Dunn, *op. cit.*, p. 247f. Dunn's argument is that Matthew has Judaized Mark 7, whereas it is possible to argue that at some points at least in Matthew 15 (e.g. v. 24) Matthew retains the earlier form of words which Mark has modified for his Gentile readership.